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# WHAT THE NEGRO WAS THINKING DURING THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

## ESSAY ON NEGRO SLAVERY <sup>1</sup>

### *No. I*

Amidst the infinite variety of moral and political subjects, proper for public commendation, it is truly surprising, that one of the most important and affecting should be so generally neglected. An encroachment on the smallest civil or political privilege, shall fan the enthusiastic flames of liberty, till it shall extend over vast and distant regions, and violently agitate a whole continent. But the cause of humanity shall be basely violated, justice shall be wounded to the heart, and national honor deeply and lastingly polluted, and not a breath or murmur shall arise to disturb the prevailing quiescence or to rouse the feelings of indignation against such general, extensive, and complicated iniquity.—To what cause are we to impute this frigid silence—this torpid indifference—this cold inanimated conduct of the otherwise warm and generous Americans? Why do they remain inactive, amidst the groans of injured humanity, the shrill and distressing complaints of expiring justice and the keen remorse of polluted integrity?—Why do they not rise up to assert the cause of God and the world, to drive the fiend injustice into remote and distant regions, and to exterminate oppression from the face of the fair fields of America?

When the united colonies revolted from Great Britain, they did it upon this principle, “that all men are by nature and of right ought to be free.”—After a long, successful, and glorious struggle for liberty, during which they manifested the firmest attachment to the rights of mankind, can they so soon forget the principles that then governed their determinations? Can Americans, after the noble contempt they expressed for tyrants, meanly descend to take up the scourge? Blush, ye revolted colonies, for having apostatized from your own principles.

Slavery, in whatever point of light it is considered, is repugnant to the feelings of nature, and inconsistent with the original

<sup>1</sup> “Othello,” the author of these two essays, was identified as a Negro by Abbé Grégoire in his “*De la littérature des Nègres*.”

rights of man. It ought therefore to be stigmatized for being unnatural; and detested for being unjust. Tis an outrage to providence and an affront offered to divine Majesty, who has given to man his own peculiar image.—That the Americans after considering the subject in this light—after making the most manly of all possible exertions in defence of liberty—after publishing to the world the principle upon which they contended, viz.: “that all men are by nature and of right ought to be free,” should still retain in subjection a numerous tribe of the human race merely for their own private use and emolument, is, of all things the strongest inconsistency, the deepest reflexion on our conduct, and the most abandoned apostasy that every took place, since the almighty fiat spoke into existence this habitable world. So flagitious a violation can never escape the notice of a just Creator whose vengeance may be now on the wing, to disseminate and hurl the arrows of destruction.

In what light can the people of Europe consider America after the strange inconsistency of her conduct? Will they not consider her as an abandoned and deceitful country? In the hour of calamity she petitioned heaven to be propitious to her cause. Her prayers were heard. Heaven pitied her distress, smiled on her virtuous exertions, and vanquished all her afflictions. The ungrateful creature forgets this timely assistance—no longer remembers her own sorrows—but basely commences oppression in her turn.—Beware America! pause—and consider the difference between the mild effulgence of approving providence and the angry countenance of incensed divinity!

The importation of slaves into America ought to be a subject of the deepest regret, to every benevolent and thinking mind.—And one of the greatest defects in the federal system, is the liberty it allows on this head. Venerable in every thing else, it is injudicious here; and it is to be much deplored, that a system of so much political perfection, should be stained with any thing that does an outrage to human nature. As a door, however, is open to amendment, for the sake of distressed humanity, of injured national reputation, and the glory of doing so benevolent a thing, I hope some wise and virtuous patriot will advocate the measure, and introduce an alteration in that pernicious part of the government.—So far from encouraging the importation of slaves, and countenancing that vile traffic in human flesh; the members of the late continental conven-

tion<sup>2</sup> should have seized the happy opportunity of prohibiting for ever this cruel species of reprobated villainy.—That they did not do so, will for ever diminish the luster of their other proceedings, so highly extolled, and so justly distinguished for their intrinsic value.—Let us for a moment contrast the sentiments and actions of the Europeans on this subject, with those of our own countrymen. In France the warmest and most animated exertions are making, in order to introduce the entire abolition of the slave trade; and in England many of the first characters of the country advocate the same measure, with an enthusiastic philanthropy. The prime minister himself is at the head of that society; and nothing can equal the ardour of their endeavours, but the glorious goodness of the cause.<sup>3</sup>—Will the Americans allow the people of England to get the start of them in acts of humanity? Forbid it shame!

The practice of stealing, or bartering for human flesh is pregnant with the most glaring turpitude, and the blackest barbarity of disposition.—For can any one say, that this is doing as he would be done by? Will such a practice stand the scrutiny of this great rule of moral government? Who can without the complicated emotions of anger and impatience, suppose himself in the predicament of a slave? Who can bear the thoughts of his relatives being torn from him by a savage enemy; carried to distant regions of the habitable globe, never more to return; and treated there as the unhappy Africans are in this country? Who can support the reflexion of his father—his mother—his sister—or his wife—perhaps his children—being barbarously snatched away by a foreign invader, without the prospect of ever beholding them again? Who can reflect upon their being afterwards publicly exposed to sale—obliged to labor with unwearied assiduity—and because all things are not possible to be performed, by persons so unaccustomed to robust exercise, scourged with all the rage and anger of malignity, until their unhappy carcasses are covered with ghastly wounds and frightful contusions? Who can reflect on these things when applying the case to himself, without being chilled with horror, at

<sup>2</sup> The writer refers here to the Convention of 1787 which framed the Constitution of the United States.

<sup>3</sup> Here the writer has in mind the organization of the English Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade and the support given the cause by Wilberforce, Pitt, Fox and Burke in England and by Brissot, Clavière and Montmorin in France.

circumstances so extremely shocking?—Yet hideous as this concise and imperfect description is, of the sufferings sustained by many of our slaves, it is nevertheless true; and so far from being exaggerated, falls infinitely short of a thousand circumstances of distress, which have been recounted by different writers on the subject, and which contribute to make their situation in this life, the most absolutely wretched, and completely miserable, that can possibly be conceived.—In many places in America, the slaves are treated with every circumstance of rigorous inhumanity, accumulated hardship, and enormous cruelty.—Yet when we take them from Africa, we deprive them of a country which God hath given them for their own; as free as we are, and as capable of enjoying that blessing. Like pirates we go to commit devastation on the coast of an innocent country, and among a people who never did us wrong.

An insatiable, avaricious desire to accumulate riches, cooperating with a spirit of luxury and injustice, seems to be the leading cause of this peculiarly degrading and ignominious practice. Being once accustomed to subsist without labour, we become soft and voluptuous; and rather than afterwards forego the gratification of our habitual indolence and ease, we countenance the infamous violation, and sacrifice at the shrine of cruelty, all the finer feelings of elevated humanity.

Considering things in this view, there surely can be nothing more justly reprehensible or disgusting than the extravagant finery of many country people's daughters. It hath not been at all uncommon to observe as much gauze, lace and other trappings, on one of those country maidens as hath employed two or three of her father's slaves, for twelve months afterwards, to raise tobacco to pay for. Tis an ungrateful reflexion that all this frippery and effected finery, can only be supported by the sweat of another person's brow, and consequently only by lawful rapine and injustice. If these young females could devote as much time from their amusements, as would be necessary for reflexion; or was there any person of humanity at hand who could inculcate the indecency of this kind of extravagance, I am persuaded that they have hearts good enough to reject with disdain, the momentary pleasure of making a figure, in behalf of the rational and lasting delight of contributing by their forbearance to the happiness of many thousand individuals.

In Maryland where slaves are treated with as much lenity, as perhaps they are any where, their situation is to the last degree ineligible. They live in wretched cots, that scarcely secure them from the inclemency of the weather; sleep in the ashes or on straw, wear the coarsest clothing, and subsist on the most ordinary food that the country produces. In all things they are subject to their master's absolute command, and, of course, have no will of their own. Thus circumstanced, they are subject to great brutality, and are often treated with it. In particular instances, they may be better provided for in this state, but this suffices for a general description. But in the Carolinas and the island of Jamaica, the cruelties that have been wantonly exercised on those miserable creatures, are without a precedent in any other part of the world. If those who have written on the subject, may be believed, it is not uncommon there, to tie a slave up and whip him to death.

On all occasions impartiality in the distribution of justice should be observed. The little state of Rhode Island has been reprobated by other states, for refusing to enter into measures respecting a new general government; and so far it is admitted that she is culpable.<sup>4</sup> But if she is worthy of blame in this respect, she is entitled to the highest admiration for the philanthropy, justice, and humanity she hath displayed, respecting the subject I am treating on. She hath passed an act prohibiting the importation of slaves into that state, and forbidding her citizens to engage in the iniquitous traffic. So striking a proof of her strong attachment to the rights of humanity, will rescue her name from oblivion, and bid her live in the good opinion of distant and unborn generations.

Slavery, unquestionably, should be abolished, particularly in this country; because it is inconsistent with the declared principles of the American Revolution. The sooner, therefore, we set about it, the better. Either we should set our slaves at liberty, immediately, and colonize them in the western territory;<sup>5</sup> or we should immediately take measures for the gradual abolition of it, so that it may become a known, and fixed point, that ultimately, universal liberty, in these united states, shall triumph.—This is the least we can do in order to evince our sense of the irreparable outrages we have committed, to wipe off the odium we have incurred,

<sup>4</sup> Rhode Island had failed to ratify the Constitution of the United States.

<sup>5</sup> During the first forty years of the republic there was much talk about colonizing the Negroes in the West.

and to give mankind a confidence again in the justice, liberality, and honour of our national proceedings.

It would not be difficult to show, were it necessary, that America would soon become a richer and more happy country, provided the step was adopted. That corrosive anguish of persevering in anything improper, which now embitters the enjoyments of life, would vanish as the mist of a foggy morn doth before the rising sun; and we should find as great a disparity between our present situation, and that which would succeed to it, as subsists between a cloudy winter, and a radiant spring.—Besides, our lands would not be then cut down for the support of a numerous train of useless inhabitants—useless, I mean, to themselves, and effectually to us, by encouraging sloth and voluptuousness among our young farmers and planters, who might otherwise know how to take care of their money, as well as how to dissipate it.—In all other respects, I conceive them to be as valuable as we are—as capable of worthy purposes, and to possess the same dignity that we do, in the estimation of providence; although the value of their work apart, for which we are dependent on them, we generally consider them as good for nothing, and accordingly, treat them with greatest neglect.

But be it remembered, that this cause is the cause of heaven; and that the father of them as well as of us, will not fail, at a future settlement, to adjust the account between us, with a dreadful attention to justice.

OTHELLO

BALTIMORE, May 10, 1788.

—*American Museum*, IV, 412–415.

## ESSAY ON NEGRO SLAVERY

### No. II

Upon no better principle do we plunder the coasts of Africa, and bring away its wretched inhabitants as slaves than that, by which the greater fish swallows up the lesser. Superior power seems only to produce superior brutality; and that weakness and imbecility, which ought to engage our protection, and interest the feelings of social benevolence in behalf of the defenceless, seems only to provoke us to acts of illiberal outrage and unmanly violence.

The practice which has been followed by the English nation, since the establishment of the slave trade—I mean that of stirring up the natives of Africa, against each other, with a view of pur-

chasing the prisoners mutually taken in battle, must strike the humane mind with sentiments of the deepest abhorrence, and confer on that people a reproach, as lasting as time itself. It is surprising that the eastern world did not unite, to discourage a custom so diabolical in its tendency, and to exterminate a species of oppression which humbles the dignity of all mankind. But this torpid inattention can only be accounted for, by adverting to the savage disposition of the times, which countenanced cruelties unheard of at this enlightened period. What rudeness of demeanor and brutality of manner, which had been introduced into Europe, by those swarms of barbarians, that overwhelmed it from the north, had hardly begun to dissipate before the enlivening sun of civilization, when this infernal practice first sprang up into existence. Before this distinguished era of refined barbarity, the sons of Africa were in possession of all the mild enjoyments of peace—all the pleasing delights of uninterrupted harmony—and all the diffusive blessings of profound tranquility. Boundless must be the punishment, which irritated providence will inflict on those whose wanton cruelty has prompted them to destroy this fair arrangement of nature—this flowery prospect of human felicity. Engulphed in the dark abyss of never ending misery, they shall in bitterness atone for the stab thus given to human nature; and in anguish unutterable expiate crimes, for which nothing less than eternal sufferings can make adequate retribution!—Equally iniquitous is the practice of robbing that country of its inhabitants; and equally tremendous will be the punishment. The voice of injured thousands, who have been violently torn from their native country, and carried to distant and inhospitable climes—the bitter lamentations of the wretched, helpless female—the cruel agonizing sensations of the husband, the father and the friend—will ascend to the throne of Omnipotence, and, from the elevated heights of heaven, cause him, with the whole force of almighty vengeance, to hurl the guilty perpetrators of those inhuman beings, down the steep precipice of inevitable ruin, into the bottomless gulph of final, irretrievable, and endless destruction!

Ye sons of America, forbear!—Consider the dire consequences, that will attend the prosecution, against which the all-powerful God of nature holds up his hands, and loudly proclaims, desist!

In the insolence of self-consequence, we are accustomed to esteem ourselves and the christian powers of Europe, the only



civilized people on the globe; the rest without distinction, we presumptuously denominate barbarians. But, when the practices above mentioned, come to be deliberately considered—when added to these, we take a view of the proceedings of the English in the East Indies, under the direction of the late Lord Clive, and remember what happened in the streets of Bengal and Calcutta—when we likewise reflect on our American mode of driving, butchering and exterminating the poor defenceless Indians, the native and lawful proprietors of the soil—we shall acknowledge, if we possess the smallest degree of candor, that the appellation of barbarian does not belong to them alone. While we continue those practices the term christian will only be a burlesque expression, signifying no more than that it ironically denominates the rudest sect of barbarians that ever disgraced the hand of their Creator. We have the precepts of the gospel for the government of our moral deportment, in violation of which, those outrageous wrongs are committed; but they have no such meliorating influence among them, and only adhere to the simple dictates of reason, and natural religion, which they never violate.

Might not the inhabitants of Africa, with still greater justice on their side, than we have on ours, cross the Atlantic, seize our citizens, carry them into Africa, and make slaves of them, provided they were able to do it? But should this be really the case, every corner of the globe would reverberate with the sound of African oppression; so loud would be our complaint, and so “feeling our appeal” to the inhabitants of the world at large. We should represent them as a lawless, piratical set of unprincipled robbers, plunderers and villains, who basely prostituted the superior power and information, which God had given them for worthy purposes to the vilest of all ends. We should not hesitate to say that they made use of those advantages only to infringe upon every dictate of justice; to trample under foot every suggestion of principle, and to spurn, with contempt, every right of humanity.

The Algerines are reprobated all the world over, for their unlawful depredations; and stigmatized as pirates, for their unreasonable exactions from foreign nations. But, the Algerines are no greater pirates than the Americans; nor are they a race more destructive to the happiness to mankind. The depredations of the latter on the coast of Africa, and upon the Indians’ Territory make the truth of this assertion manifest. The piratical depredations of

the Algerines appear to be a judgment from heaven upon the nations, to punish their perfidy and atrocious violations of justice; and never did any people more justly merit the scourge than Americans, on whom it seems to fall with peculiar and reiterated violence. When they yoke our citizens to the plow, and compel them to labour in that degraded manner, they only retaliate on us for similar barbarities. For Algiers is a part of the same country, whose helpless inhabitants we are accustomed to carry away. But the English and Americans cautiously avoid engaging with a war-like people, whom they fear to attack in a manner so base and unworthy; whilst the Algerines, more generous and courageous plunderers, are not afraid to make war on brave and well-disciplined enemies, who are capable of making a gallant resistance.

Whoever examines into the conditions of the slaves in America will find them in a state of the most uncultivated rudeness. Not instructed in any kind of learning, they are grossly ignorant of all refinement, and have little else about them, belonging to the nature of civilized man, than mere form. They are strangers to almost every idea, that doth not relate to their labour or their food; and though naturally possessed of strong sagacity, and lively parts, are, in all respects, in a state of most deplorable brutality.—This is owing to the iron-hand of oppression, which ever crushes the bud of genius and binds up in chains every expansion of the human mind.—Such is their extreme ignorance that they are utterly unacquainted with the laws of the world—the injunctions of religion—their own natural rights, and the forms, ceremonies and privileges of marriage originally established by the Divinity. Accordingly they lived in open violation of the precepts of christianity and with as little formality or restrictions as the brutes of the field, unite for the purposes of procreation. Yet this is a civilized country and a most enlightened period of the world! The resplendent glory of the gospel is at hand, to conduct us in safety through the labyrinths of life. Science hath grown up to maturity, and is discovered to possess not only all the properties of solidity of strength, but likewise every ornament of elegance, and every embellishment of fancy. Philosophy hath here attained the most exalted height of elevation; and the art of government hath received such refinements among us, as hath equally astonished our friends, our enemies and ourselves. In fine, no annals are more brilliant than those of America; nor do any more luxuriantly

abound with examples of exalted heroism, refined policy, and sympathetic humanity. Yet now the prospect begins to change; and all the splendor of this august assemblage, will soon be overcast by sudden and impenetrable clouds; and American greatness be obliterated and swallowed up by one enormity. Slavery diffuses the gloom, and casts around us the deepest shade of approaching darkness. No longer shall the united states of America be famed for liberty. Oppression pervades their bowels; and while they exhibit a fair exterior to the other parts of the world, they are nothing more than "painted sepulchres," containing within them nought but rottenness and corruption.

Ye voluptuous, ye opulent and great, who hold in subjection such numbers of your fellow-creatures, and suffer these things to happen—beware! Reflect on this lamentable change, that may, at a future period, take place against you. Arraigned before the almighty Sovereign of the universe, how will you answer the charge of such complicated enormity? The presence of these slaves, who have been lost, for want of your instruction, and by means of your oppression, shall make you dart deeper into the flames, to avoid their just reproaches, and seek out for an asylum, in the hidden corners of perdition.

Many persons of opulence in Virginia, and the Carolinas, treat their unhappy slaves with every circumstance of coolest neglect, and the most deliberate indifference. Surrounded with a numerous train of servants, to contribute to their personal ease, and wallowing in all the luxurious plenitude of riches, they neglect the wretched source, whence they draw this profusion. Many of their negroes, on distant estates, are left to the entire management of inhuman overseers, where they suffer for the want of that sustenance, which, at the proprietors seat of residence, is wastefully given to the dogs. It frequently happens, on these large estates, that they are not clothed, 'till winter is nearly expired; and then, the most valuable only are attended to; the young, and the labour-worn, having no other allowance, in this respect, than the tattered garments, thrown off by the more fortunate. A single peck of corn a week, or the like measure of rice, is the ordinary quantity of provision for a hard working slave; to which a small quantity of meat is occasionally, tho' rarely, added. While those miserable degraded persons thus scantily subsist, all the produce of their unwearyed toil, is taken away to satiate their rapacious master. He,

devoted wretch! thoughtless of the sweat and toil with which his wearied, exhausted dependents procure what he extravagantly dissipates, not contented with the ordinary luxuries of life, is, perhaps, planning, at the time, some improvement on the voluptuous art.—Thus he sets up two carriages instead of one; maintains twenty servants, when a fourth part of that number are more than sufficient to discharge the business of personal attendance; makes every animal, proper for the purpose, bleed around him, in order to supply the gluttonous profusion of his table; and generally gives away what his slaves are pining for;—those very slaves, whose labour enables him to display this liberality!—No comment is necessary, to expose the peculiar folly, ingratitude, and infamy of such execrable conduct.

But the custom of neglecting those slaves, who have been worn out in our service, is unhappily found to prevail, not only among the more opulent but thro' the more extensive round of the middle and inferior ranks of life. No better reason can be given for this base inattention, than that they are no longer able to contribute to our emoluments. With singular dishonor, we forget the faithful instrument of past enjoyment, and when, by length of time, it becomes debilitated, it is, like a withered stalk, ungratefully thrown away.

Our slaves unquestionably have the strongest of all claims upon us, for protection and support; we having compelled them to involuntary servitude, and deprived them of every means of protecting or supporting themselves. The injustice of our conduct, and barbarity of our neglect, when this reflexion is allowed to predominate, becomes so glaringly conspicuous, as even to excite, against ourselves, the strongest emotion of detestation and abhorrence.

To whom are the wretched sons of Africa to apply for redress, if their cruel master treats them with unkindness? To whom will they resort for protection, if he is base enough to refuse it to them? The law is not their friend;—alas! too many statutes are enacted against them. The world is not their friend;—the iniquity is too general and extensive. No one who hath slaves of his own, will protect those of another, less the practice should be retorted. Thus when their masters abandon them, their situation is destitute and forlorn, and God is their only friend!

Let us imitate the conduct of a neighboring state, and immedi-

ately take measures, at least, for the gradual abolition of slavery.<sup>6</sup> Justice demands it of us, and we ought not to hesitate in obeying its inviolable mandates.—All the feelings of pity, compassion, affection, and benevolence—all the emotions of tenderness, humanity, philanthropy, and goodness—all the sentiments of mercy, probity, honour, and integrity, unite to solicit for their emancipation. Immortal will be the glory of accomplishing their liberation; and eternal the disgrace of keeping them in chains.

But, if the state of Pennsylvania is to be applauded for her conduct, that of South Carolina can never be too strongly execrated.<sup>7</sup> The legislature of that state, at no very remote period, brought in a bill for prohibiting the use of letters to their slaves, and forbidding them the privilege of being taught to read!—This was a deliberate attempt to enslave the minds of those unfortunate objects, whose persons they already held in arbitrary subjection:—Detestable deviation from the becoming rectitude of man.

One more peculiarly distressing circumstance remains to be recounted, before I take my final leave of the subject.—In the ordinary course of the business of the country, the punishment of relatives frequently happens on the same farm, and in view of each other:—The father often sees his beloved son—the son his venerable sire—the mother her much-loved daughter—the daughter her affectionate parent—the husband the wife of his bosom, and she the husband of her affection, cruelly bound up without delicacy or mercy, and punished with all extremity of incensed rage, and all the rigour of unrelenting severity, whilst these unfortunate wretches dare not even interpose in each other's behalf. Let us reverse the case and suppose it ours:—all is silent horror!

OTHELLO

MARYLAND, May 23, 1788.

—*American Museum*, IV, 509–512.

#### LETTER ON SLAVERY BY A NEGRO

I am one of that unfortunate race of men, who are distinguished from the rest of the human species, by a black skin and woolly hair—disadvantages of very little moment in themselves, but which prove

<sup>6</sup> The writer refers here to the acts of Pennsylvania, providing for the abolition of slavery.

<sup>7</sup> In 1740 South Carolina enacted a law prohibiting any one from teaching a slave to read or employing one in "any manner of writing." Georgia enacted the same law in 1770.

to us a source of greatest misery, because there are men, who will not be persuaded that it is possible for a human soul to be lodged within a sable body. The West Indian planters could not, if they thought us men, so wantonly spill our blood; nor could the natives of this land of liberty, deeming us of the same species with themselves, submit to be instrumental in enslaving us, or think us proper subjects of a sordid commerce. Yet, strong as the prejudices against us are, it will not, I hope on this side of the Atlantic, be considered as a crime, for a poor African not to confess himself a being of an inferior order to those, who happen to be of a different colour from himself; or be thought very presumptuous, in one who is but a negro, to offer to the happy subjects of this free government, some reflections upon the wretched condition of his countrymen. They will not, I trust, think worse of my brethren, for being discontented with so hard a lot as that of slavery; nor disown me for their fellow-creature, merely because I deeply feel the unmerited sufferings which my countrymen endure.

It is neither the vanity of being an author, nor a sudden and capricious gust of humanity, which has prompted this present design. It has long been conceived and long been the principal subject of my thoughts. Ever since an indulgent master rewarded my youthful services with freedom and supplied me at a very early age with the means of acquiring knowledge, I have laboured to understand the true principles, on which the liberties of mankind are founded, and to possess myself of the language of this country, in order to plead the cause of those who were once my fellow slaves, and if possible to make my freedom, in some degree, the instrument of their deliverance.

The first thing then, which seems necessary, in order to remove those prejudices, which are so unjustly entertained against us, is to prove that we are men—a truth which is difficult of proof, only because it is difficult to imagine, by what argument it can be combatted. Can it be contended that a difference of colour alone can constitute a difference of species?—if not in what single circumstance are we different from the rest of mankind? what variety is there in our organization? what inferiority of art in the fashioning of our bodies? what imperfection in the faculties of our minds?—Has not a negro eyes? has not a negro hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?—fed with the same food; hurt with the same weapons; subject to the same diseases; healed by the same

means; warmed and cooled by the same summer and winter as a white man? if you prick us, do we not bleed? if you poison us, do we not die? are we not exposed to all the same wants? do we not feel all the same sentiments—are we not capable of all the same exertions—and are we not entitled to all the same rights, as other men?

Yes—and it is said we are men, it is true; but that we are men, addicted to more and worse vices, than those of any other complexion; and such is the innate perverseness of our minds, that nature seems to have marked us out for slavery.—Such is the apology perpetually made for our masters, and the justification offered for that universal proscription, under which we labour.

But, I supplicate our enemies to be, though for the first time, just in their proceedings toward us, and to establish the fact before, they attempt to draw any conclusions from it. Nor let them imagine that this can be done, by merely asserting that such is our universal character. It is the character, I grant, that our inhuman masters have agreed to give us, and which they have so industriously and too successfully propagated, in order to palliate their own guilt, by blackening the helpless victims of it, and to disguise their own cruelty under the semblance of justice. Let the natural depravity of our character be proved—not by appealing to declamatory invectives, and interested representations, but by showing that a greater proportion of crimes have been committed by the wronged slaves of the plantation, than by the luxurious inhabitants of Europe, who are happily strangers to those aggravated provocations, by which our passions are every day irritated and incensed. Show us, that, of the multitude of negroes, who have within a few years transported themselves to this country,<sup>8</sup> and who are abandoned to themselves; who are corrupted by example, prompted by penury, and instigated by the memory of their wrongs to the commission of crime—shew us, I say (and the demonstration, if it be possible, cannot be difficult) that a greater proportion of these, than of white men have fallen under the animadversions of justice, and have been sacrificed to your laws. Though avarice may slander and insult our misery, and though poets heighten the horror of their fables, by representing us as monsters of vice—the fact is, that, if treated like other men, and admitted to a participation of their rights, we should differ from them in nothing, perhaps, but in our

<sup>8</sup> This letter was originally published in England, where the number of Negroes had considerably increased after the war in America.

possessing stronger passions, nicer sensibility, and more enthusiastic virtue.

Before so harsh a decision was pronounced upon our nature, we might have expected—if sad experience had not taught us, to expect nothing but injustice from our adversaries—that some pains would have been taken, to ascertain, what our nature is; and that we should have been considered, as we are found in our native woods, and not as we now are—altered and perverted by an inhuman political institution. But, instead of this, we are examined, not by philosophers, but by interested traders: not as nature formed us, but as man has depraved us—and from such an inquiry, prosecuted under such circumstances, the perverseness of our dispositions is said to be established. Cruel that you are! you make us slaves; you implant in our minds all the vices, which are in some degree, inseparable from that condition; and you then impiously impute to nature, and to God, the origin of those vices, to which you alone have given birth; and punish in us the crimes, of which you are yourselves the authors.

The condition of the slave is in nothing more deplorable, than in its being so unfavorable to the practice of every virtue. The surest foundation of virtue is love of our fellow creatures; and that affection takes its birth, in the social relations of men to one another. But to a slave these are all denied. He never pays or receives the grateful duties of a son—he never knows or experiences the fond solicitude of a father—the tender names of husband, of brother, and of friend, are to him unknown. He has no country to defend and bleed for—he can relieve no sufferings—for he looks around in vain, to find a being more wretched than himself. He can indulge no generous sentiment—for he sees himself every hour treated with contempt and ridiculed, and distinguished from irrational brutes, by nothing but the severity of punishment. Would it be surprising, if a slave, labouring under all these disadvantages—oppressed, insulted, scorned, trampled on—should come at last to despise himself—to believe the calumnies of his oppressors—and to persuade himself, that it would be against his nature, to cherish any honourable sentiment or to attempt any virtuous action? Before you boast of your superiority over us, place some of your own colour (if you have the heart to do it) in the same situation with us; and see, whether they have such innate virtue, and such unconquerable vigour of mind, as to be capable of surmounting such



multiplied difficulties, and of keeping their minds free from the infection of every vice, even under the oppressive yoke of such a servitude.

But, not satisfied with denying us that indulgence, to which the misery of our condition gives us so just a claim, our enemies have laid down other and stricter rules of morality, to judge our actions by, than those by which the conduct of all other men is tried. Habits, which in all human beings, except ourselves, are thought innocent, are, in us, deemed criminal—and actions, which are even laudable in white men, become enormous crimes in negroes. In proportion to our weakness, the strictness of censure is increased upon us; and as resources are withheld from us, our duties are multiplied. The terror of punishment is perpetually before our eyes; but we know not, how to avert it, what rules to act by, or what guides to follow. We have written laws, indeed, composed in a language we do not understand and never promulgated: but what avail written laws, when the supreme law, with us, is the capricious will of our overseers? To obey the dictates of our own hearts, and to yield to the strong propensities of nature, is often to incur severe punishment; and by emulating examples which we find applauded and revered among Europeans, we risk inflaming the wildest wrath of our inhuman tyrants.

To judge of the truth of these assertions, consult even those milder and subordinate rules for our conduct, the various codes of your West India laws—those laws which allow us to be men, whenever they consider us as victims of their vengeance, but treat us only like a species of living property, as often as we are to be the objects of their protection—those laws by which (it may be truly said) that we are bound to suffer, and be miserable under pain of death. To resent an injury, received from a white man, though of the lowest rank, and to dare to strike him, though upon the strongest and grossest provocation, is an enormous crime. To attempt to escape from the cruelties exercised upon us, by flight, is punished with mutilation, and sometimes with death. To take arms against masters, whose cruelties no submission can mitigate, no patience exhaust, and from whom no other means of deliverance are left, is the most atrocious of all crimes; and is punished by a gradual death, lengthened out by torments, so exquisite, that none, but those who have been long familiarized, with West Indian barbarity, can hear the bare recital of them without horror. And yet I learn from

writers, whom the Europeans hold in the highest esteem, that treason is a crime, which cannot be committed by a slave against his master; that a slave stands in no civil relation towards his master, and owes him no allegiance; that master and slave are in a state of war; and if the slave take up arms for his deliverance, he acts not only justifiably, but in obedience to a natural duty, the duty of self-preservation. I read in authors whom I find venerated by our oppressors, that to deliver one's self and one's countrymen from tyranny, is an act of the sublimest heroism. I hear Europeans exalted, as the martyrs of public liberty, the saviours of their country, and the deliverers of mankind—I see other memories honoured with statues, and their names immortalized in poetry—and yet when a generous negro is animated by the same passion which ennobled them,—when he feels the wrongs of his countrymen as deeply, and attempts to avenge them as boldly—I see him treated by those same Europeans as the most execrable of mankind, and led out, amidst curses and insults to undergo a painful, gradual and ignominious death: And thus the same Briton, who applauds his own ancestors for attempting to throw off the easy yoke, imposed on them by the Romans, punishes us, as detested parricides, for seeking to get free from the cruelest of all tyrannies, and yielding to the irresistible eloquence of an African Galgacus or Boadicea.

Are then the reason and morality, for which Europeans so highly value themselves, of a nature so variable and fluctuating, as to change with the complexion of those, to whom they are applied?—Do rights of nature cease to be such, when a negro is to enjoy them?—Or does patriotism in the heart of an African, rankle into treason?

A FREE NEGRO

—*American Museum*, V, 77 et seq., 1789.

REMARKABLE SPEECH OF ADAHOONZOU, KING OF DAHOMEY, AN INTERIOR NATION OF AFRICA, ON HEARING WHAT WAS PASSING IN ENGLAND RESPECTING THE SLAVE TRADE

I admire the reasoning of the white men; but with all their sense, it does not appear that they have thoroughly studied the nature of the blacks, whose disposition differs as much from that of the whites, as their colour. The same great Being formed both; and since it hath seemed convenient for him to distinguish mankind by opposite complexions, it is a fair conclusion to presume that there may

be as a great a disagreement in the qualities of their minds; there is likewise a remarkable difference between the countries which we inhabit. You, Englishmen, for instance, as I have been informed, are surrounded by the ocean, and by this situation seem intended to hold communication with the whole world, which you do, by means of your ships; whilst we Dahomans, being placed on a large continent, and hemmed in amidst a variety of other people, of the same complexion, but speaking different languages, are obliged by the sharpness of our swords, to defend ourselves from their incursions, and punish the depredations they make on us. Such conduct in them is productive of incessant wars. Your countrymen, therefore, who alledge that we go to war for the purpose of supplying your ships with slaves, are grossly mistaken.

You think you can work a reformation as you call it, in the manners of the blacks; but you ought to consider the disproportion between the magnitude of the two countries; and then you will soon be convinced of the difficulties that must be surmounted, to change the system of such a vast country as this. We know you are a brave people, and that you might bring over a great many of the blacks to your opinions, by points of your bayonets; but to effect this, a great many must be put to death and numerous cruelties must be committed, which we do not find to have been the practice of the whites; besides, that this would militate against the very principle which is professed by those who wish to bring about a reformation.

In the name of my ancestors and myself, I aver, that no Dahoman ever embarked in war merely for the sake of procuring wherewithal to purchase your commodities. I, who have not been long master of this country, have without thinking of the market, killed many thousands, and I shall kill many thousands more. When policy or justice requires that men be put to death, neither silk, nor coral, nor brandy, nor cowries, can be accepted as substitutes for the blood that ought to be spilt for example sake: besides if white men chuse to remain at home, and no longer visit this country for the same purpose that has usually brought them thither, will black men cease to make war? I answer, by no means, and if there be no ships to receive their captives, what will become of them? I answer, for you, they will be put to death. Perhaps you may be asked, how will the blacks be punished with guns and powder? I reply by another question, had we not clubs, and bows,

and arrows before we knew white men? Did not you see me make *custom*—annual ceremony—for Weebaigah, the third king of Dahomey? And did you not observe on the day such ceremony was performing, that I carried a bow in my hand, and a quiver filled with arrows on my back? These were the emblems of the times; when, with such weapons, that brave ancestor fought and conquered all his neighbors. God made war for all the world; and every kingdom, large or small, has practiced it, more or less, though perhaps in a manner unlike, and upon different principles. Did Weebaigah sell slaves? No; his prisoners were all killed to a man. What else could he have done with them? Was he to let them remain in this country to cut the throats of his subjects? This would have been wretched policy indeed; which, had it been adopted, the Dahoman name would have long ago been extinguished, instead of becoming as it is at this day, the terror of surrounding nations. What hurts me most is, that some of your people have maliciously misrepresented us in books, which never die; alledging that we sell our wives and children for the sake of procuring a few kegs of brandy. No! We are shamefully belied, and I hope you will contradict, from my mouth, the scandalous stories that have been propagated; and tell posterity that we have been abused. We do, indeed, sell to the white men a part of our prisoners, and we have a right to do so. Are not all prisoners at the disposal of their captors? and are we to blame, if we send delinquents to a far country? I have been told you do the same. If you want no more slaves from us, why cannot you be ingenious and tell the plain truth; saying that the slaves you have already purchased are sufficient for the country for which you bought them; or that the artists who used to make fine things, are all dead, without having taught anybody to make more? But for a parcel of men, with long heads, to sit down in England, and frame laws for us, and pretend to dictate how we are to live, of whom they know nothing, never having been in a black man's country during the whole course of their lives, is to me somewhat extraordinary! No doubt they must have been biased by the report of some one, who had had to do with us; who, for want of a due knowledge of the treatment of slaves, found that they died on his hands, and that his money was lost; and seeing that others thrived by the traffic, he envious of their good luck, has vilified both black and white traders.

You have seen me kill many men at the customs; and you have often observed delinquents at Grigwhee, and others of my provinces tied, and sent up to me. I kill them, but do I ever insist on being paid for them? Some heads I order to be placed at my door, others to be strewed about the market place, that the people may stumble upon them, when they little expect such a sight. This gives a grandeur to my customs, far beyond the display of fine things which I buy; this makes my enemies fear me, and gives me such a name in the Bush.<sup>3</sup> Besides, if I neglect this indispensable duty, would my ancestors suffer me to live? would they not trouble me day and night, and say, that I sent no body to serve them? that I was only solicitous about my own name, and forgetful of my ancestors? White men are not acquainted with these circumstances; but I now tell you that you may hear and know, and inform your countrymen, why customs are made, and will be made, as long as black men continue to possess their country; the few that can be spared from this necessary celebration, we sell to the white men; and happy, no doubt, are such, when they find themselves on the Grigwhee, to be disposed of to the Europeans. "We shall still drink water," say they to themselves; "white men will not kill us; and we may even avoid punishment, by serving our new masters with fidelity."—*The New York Weekly Magazine*, II, 430, 1792.

<sup>3</sup> The country expression for the woods was "Bush."